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Soldier To Student

Even Amid Campus Calm, Veterans Can Struggle To Make The Transition

By DANIELA ALTIMARI | Courant Staff Writer

NEW BRITAIN — - Walking around campus or sitting in class, he's like any other student at Central Connecticut State University. But Joe O'Keefe is keenly aware that something sets him apart. The 25-year-old history major from Meriden is an Iraq war veteran, one of hundreds of thousands of vets swelling the ranks of colleges and universities across the nation. About 1,000 of them — roughly 10 percent of the student body — are enrolled at Central alone.



The surge of former military personnel is evident on campuses such as Cleveland State University, which offers special classes open only to veterans, and at San Diego State University, where a bustling association of student veterans hosts support groups, special speakers and morale-boosting get-togethers over banana splits. Other colleges have put out a call to veterans, offering scholarships and financial aid to bolster their presence. At Central and at the three other schools that make up the state university system, veterans pay no tuition, although they are charged fees.

It's all a recognition that veterans enrich campus life in countless ways. They're often "more focused, more mature and much more aware of why they are here," says Paul Petterson, associate professor and chairman of Central's political science department. "Students who have been deployed bring a perspective to our class discussions that's just wonderful to have." But the shift from soldier to student isn't always seamless. In fact, leaving the intensity of combat for the calm of the classroom can be jarring, even at an unpretentious state school such as Central. "It's almost like I've left one society and gone to another," says O'Keefe, who has a warm smile and brown eyes and bears a strong resemblance to actor Edward Norton.

O'Keefe joined the Marines on Sept. 7, 2001. The country was at peace, and he figured he'd earn a little money for college and see the world. Instead, he wound up spending the next four years with an F-18 squadron, including an eight-month stint loading bombs onto fighter jets in Iraq. His fellow students are, for the most part, welcoming, though there are always a few who feel compelled to ask an inappropriate question or two: "Did you shoot anybody? Did you get to kill anybody?"

It's the same with the faculty. Most are supportive, though their left-of-center worldview often butts uncomfortably against the conservative mind-set of these military veterans. "I listen to some professors talk and I'm like, 'Dude, you spent your entire life in the classroom.'" O'Keefe says with a dismissive shake of the head.

There are other issues, like large lecture halls packed with students. For a returning veteran struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, crowds can be disconcerting. Even filling out the mountains of paperwork that school and the GI Bill demand can be overwhelming, though at Central, students have plenty of help navigating the bureaucracy.

Some days, O'Keefe and other vets just want to surround themselves with people who know what it's like to flinch at the wowl of an air raid siren, to endure the blinding repetition of daily life during wartime and to crave a glimpse of green after months in the brown desert. People who know what it's like to bury a comrade killed by a 13-year-old with an AK-47. What Central's veterans are